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Motivational Strategies and Student Participation

by

Amanda Richards

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A thesis submitted to the

Department of Education and Human Development of the

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Master of Science in Education

Motivational Strategies and Student Participation

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Chapter 1

Introduction

According to Muir (2001), American public education has taken on the enterprising task of educating every child. Muir states that this is a challenge because there are many children that are unmotivated, disengaged, and underachieving. One of the biggest challenges the country faces is math achievement. According to Middleton and Spanias (1999), American students demonstrate less math ability than other nations. These researchers show that American children do not possess the mathematical knowledge that they will need to function smoothly in an increasingly technological society. They believe it is important to improve math education for all grades. Portal and Sampson (2001) agree. They, too, found that the biggest deficiency lies in secondary math. Middleton and Spanias (1999) found that by the time students reach middle school, many begin to perceive math as a place where only smart kids succeed. This is a problem because without a belief that they can be successful, many students will not be motivated to try (Mendler, 2000). Middleton and Spanias (1999) also report that American children tend to enjoy math in the primary grades; however, this level of enjoyment tends to fall dramatically when children progress into and through high school.

High numbers of middle and high school students have a negative attitude toward school. Rief and Heimburge (1996) found that when students feel incompetent, or have a lack of skills in a particular subject area, their motivation to learn decreases. Many of these same students are unable to see how the content being taught connects to their own lives. They ask questions such as; "When will I ever have to use this?" Or, "Why do I

have to learn this?" These questions often occur when a student is studying a topic that he or she is not interested in (Mendler, 2000). The inability to see the relevance of the topic to their lives is one of the main obstacles to increasing student motivation and participation in class.

Parents, students, teachers and curriculum are the primary contributors to student motivation and engagement in learning (Brewster & Fager, 2000; Brown, 2002; Mendler, 2000). According to Fuller (2004), parents are the primary influence on their child's motivation to learn and behave. For most children, a parent is the first and most important teacher in their life. Kids copy the actions and attitudes that their parents display and behaviors will often carry over to the classroom setting. Fuller (2004) notes how important it is for parents to model the appropriate behavior and attitude that they want to see from their child.

Teachers can also affect motivation. Curriculum delivery, classroom management, and the learning environment have a huge influence on whether students will be engaged in learning. It is the responsibility of the teacher to instill a belief in the student that they can be successful. Without this belief, motivation is nearly impossible. Tileson (2004) concurs and adds that the lesson must be of interest to the student and at the right degree of difficulty before they will have the motivation to work at being successful.

Mendler (2000), states that learning also requires dedication and hard work on the part of the student. Acquisition of complex and demanding curriculum, such as chemistry, physics and advanced math are often time consuming. The student must invest energy and effort for learning to occur. Mendler continues by suggesting that

some students do not understand that it is their responsibility to learn information and practice the material being taught.

Student motivation is important because it highly correlates with student engagement, academic achievement, and good classroom behavior (Muir, 2001). Active engagement, such as hand raising, answering and asking questions, and group activities are critical to student motivation and are key factors in learning. Brewster and Fager (2000), show that the extent to which students actively participate in classroom activities and discussions has a significant impact on their perceptions of the learning environment. They show that if a student perceives that they can be successful, often times they will be. Mendler (2000) adds that high motivation and engagement in learning have consistently been linked to reduced dropout rates and increased levels of retention and student success. An increase in student motivation can directly lead to an increase in overall academic ability.

Goslin (2003), explains that as few as 20% of students are engaged in learning most of the time. Fifty percent or more of students do not work up to their academic potential. Sixty-seven percent of students feel they can do better in school if they try harder. These statistics raise some important questions. Why don't students try? What is stopping them or holding them back from achieving their best? When 67% of students are not trying their hardest, this can be viewed as a significant problem.

A large number of students drop out of school. "Many more are physically present in the classroom but mentally absent" (para. 2, "Student Motivation," n.d.). These students fail to invest themselves fully in the experience of learning. Lack of participation and decreasing motivation frustrates both teachers and students.

Educators are in constant search of the most effective ways to motivate their students. Brewster and Fager (2000), note that keeping students interested in school and motivating them to succeed are challenges that present themselves every year. If teachers, parents, and students are more aware of their roles in affecting motivation, academic achievement can increase dramatically. Brown (2002) shows that learning must be a team effort in which all involved - including teachers, students and parents - work toward the common goal of student success in the classroom.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not motivational strategies would have any effect on student participation. Parents and educators are responsible for helping their children develop motivation to learn. This is a difficult job for which there is no simple plan. Therefore, as part of my study, I surveyed parents, teachers, and students in my ninth grade school community to discern motivational strategies important to them. I implemented some of these motivational techniques gained from the surveys in my own classroom.

To begin my study, I aggregated some baseline information. This information was collected each math class from four students. Every ten minutes, I kept a record of whether the students put their head down, gave up on the assigned task, were off-task, asked questions, and answered questions. These were some measurable and observable characteristics used to determine a student's level of motivation and participation. I also logged the activities that seemed to increase student motivation the most.

After a week of gathering baseline data, I implemented many of the motivational ideas gained from the surveys. I continued to record every ten minutes whether the

students were demonstrating the observable characteristics. I also kept track of the activities that seemed to be most motivating. I continued this part of the study for three weeks.

After the four weeks of gathering quantitative data, I interviewed the four students and explained my project to them. I asked the students which activities motivated them or got them to participate the most. The students were then asked why these specific activities motivated them and what other activities would motivate them to participate in class more often. I was hoping to find a positive correlation between the activities suggested in the surveys and increased motivation and student participation in math activities.

Rationale

I pursued this topic because of the population of students I work with. I teach special education students in a self-contained setting. My students all have below average ability with minimal math reasoning and problem solving skills. They struggle with basic operations and it can be very difficult for them to visualize complex math relationships. Because math concepts build on each other, it was so important for students to understand each concept that was presented. Missing one key concept can cause a student to struggle through the rest of their math education, begin to have a negative view of the subject, and become unmotivated.

Students do not understand or learn concepts for many different reasons. These include, being absent from school, daydreaming, sleeping in class, or paying more attention to their friends than the lesson. Others do not ask clarifying questions or are afraid to admit in public that they do not understand a concept. Many of my students do

not see how algebraic concepts relate to their lives. They quickly become bored and disengage from learning.

Even equipped with a calculator many of my students were overwhelmed and unmotivated to learn algebra. However, they are all required to pass the Math A state exam in order to earn a Regents diploma. It was understandable that these students were unmotivated in a subject in which they felt unsuccessful.

The classroom setting does not always provide the instant gratification, action, and feedback that many students need. The lives of students are filled with video games, i-pods, high definition television, e-mail, instant messenger, cell phones and other advanced technologies. Our students have grown accustomed to this immediate feedback and now struggle to complete a task that requires persistence. According to Tileston (2004), the average American child spends more than four and a half hours a day in front of the television or computer screen. When school work does not seem as engaging, they often quit tasks before they are completed. Capturing and holding the attention of each student is a daily goal of many educators. Students' shrinking attention span and decrease in motivation in the school setting make teaching more difficult each year.

From this study, I hoped to learn some effective ways to motivate my students and increase participation. I believe that when students are actively engaged in the lesson, academic achievement would increase. When students feel successful, the process of learning can be much more enjoyable for both the teacher and the student.

Definition of Terms

Emotional climate- includes such things as acceptance by teacher and peers, self-esteem, safety, and lack of threat.

Extrinsic motivation- the desire to do something because of the promise or hope of a tangible result or reward.

Feedback- information, both positive and negative, given to a student in regards to their work or behavior.

Intrinsic motivation- the drive that comes from within. Students do something for the sheer joy of doing it or because they want to discover something, answer a question, or experience self-accomplishment.

Learned helplessness- occurs when a student feels like they have no control over their learning success.

Physical climate- includes such things as room arrangement, appearance of room, smell, temperature, and lighting.

Rewards- are a form of extrinsic motivation, they have commercial value and are expected.

(Tileston, 2004, p. 65-69.)

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The following literature review summarizes different types of motivation and how they affect learning. The research also identifies how parents, teachers, and peers can influence student motivation.

According to Tileston (2004), the word motivation relates to a person's drive to do something. Motivation drives people to study new things and encourages them to try again if they fail. It also helps people to begin and complete a task that is challenging and may be of little personal interest.

Wagner (2002) states that all children are born with motivation to learn. It is a characteristic of the human species. Children are naturally curious and search their environment to make sense of their surroundings. Most children enter kindergarten excited about learning how to read and write. Stipek and Seal (2001) observe, however, that motivation seems to dwindle with age. They further indicate that the decline is steady after third grade. Stipek and Seal continue that after third grade, students view the learning process as monotonous and boring. This is a contrast to the excitement and determination that propels them when they are younger.

There are many reasons why this decrease in motivation occurs. Wagner (2002) emphasizes that children in school are no longer receiving the personalized attention from their family or caregivers. These children are now learners among twenty or more classmates all vying for the attention of one or possibly two teachers. Wagner also points out that children are expected to follow a set curriculum. Children cannot always explore the avenues they are personally interested in. Wagner (2002) continues that in higher

grades there is a shift to an increased emphasis on grades and competition. Honor roll, national honor society, and class rankings all force students to compete with each other (Kohn, 1999). Kohn (1999) states that this creates a negative atmosphere in which students are not willing to help each other and often times want their classmates to fail.

Wagner (2002) further observes that this evaluative environment utilizes a plethora of quizzes, tests, and state assessments to determine how well students are learning. Before formal testing occurs, most kids learn that mistakes are an avenue to learning (Stipek & Seal, 2001). Wagner finds that once testing begins, students quickly learn that mistakes equal failure. This failure gives them a negative impression of the subject and decreases their motivation to try. Wagner also points out that students begin to receive homework and learning becomes increasingly complex.

There are many characteristics of a student who is unmotivated. Brewster and Fager (2000) note that an unmotivated student shows signs of boredom, passiveness and procrastination. Goslin (2003) agrees and adds that unmotivated students prefer easy work that can be done with minimal effort, are easily discouraged and distracted, do not volunteer to answer questions or ask any of their own, and claim that the work is boring. Goslin continues that these students show little or no comprehension of the material being taught and often display behavior problems.

Brewster and Fager (2000) find that motivated students express positive emotions when learning. These emotions include high interest, curiosity, and enthusiasm. Motivated students are more attentive and display more comprehension of the material being taught. These students are actively participating in their learning by answering and asking questions. Students are less distracted and focus on learning and succeeding in

school. Motivated students usually do not misbehave because they are so interested in what they are learning. Success increases, which leads to higher self-esteem (Brewster & Fager, 2000; Brown, 2002; Smith, n.d.).

In order to understand the different ways that parents, teachers, and peers can increase motivation, it is important to distinguish between the two types of motivation that currently exist. They are intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation (Tileson, 2004).

Intrinsic motivation is the drive that comes from within (Tileson, 2004). This type of motivation exists when students do something for the sheer joy of it or because they want to discover something, answer a question, or experience the feeling of self-accomplishment. Haines (2001) states, "Sometimes a student is fascinated in a subject and eager to learn more without any outside influences" (p. 6).

When individuals engage in tasks in which they are motivated intrinsically, they tend to exhibit desirable learner characteristics (Middleton and Spanias, 1999). These characteristics include increased time on task, persistence in the face of failure, more elaborative processing, selection of more difficult tasks, greater creativity and risk-taking and selection of deeper and more efficient learning strategies. Brewster and Fager (2000) add that intrinsically motivated students also earn higher grades, are better adjusted to school, feel more confident in their abilities, have decision-making strategies, and retain information longer.

Tileston (2004) reports that extrinsic motivation is triggered by outside sources, meaning that a student will get a tangible reward for completing a task. This is consistent with the behaviorist theory, in which behavior is manipulated by providing rewards and

or punishments. Haines (2001) finds that extrinsic motivation is the most frequently used form of motivation in schools today and states, "Stamps, stickers, and tasty treats are tokens of encouragement that can be used to heighten performance levels" (p. 7). Brown (2002) explains that external rewards are sometimes the only way to entice a student to participate and complete tasks. He comments further that extrinsic motivation is beneficial because it gives the student a concrete goal to work toward. An incentive can also help a child discover the intrinsic value of an activity so they can begin to gain the much needed intrinsic motivation (Mendler, 2000). Brown (2002) recognizes that extrinsic motivation can be useful to change behavior when it is used in moderation and balanced with an emphasis on intrinsic motivation.

Mendler (2000) argues that although using extrinsic incentives can change behavior, the change rarely lasts. He explains that these extrinsic motivators encourage students to always ask what is in it for them. This attitude rarely gets the lasting change educators are seeking. Mendler points out that students start to expect a reward every time they complete an assignment. They become dependant on rewards and show little desire to learn once the rewards are no longer accessible (Haines, 2001). Extrinsically motivated students tend to gravitate toward tasks that are low in difficulty and usually put forth minimal effort necessary to get the maximal reward ("Student Motivation," n.d.).

Tileston (2004) agrees that in order for true motivation to occur, intrinsic must replace extrinsic as the primary focus in schools. She believes that this will bring back the joy of learning. Without this joy, motivating kids will continue to be difficult.

Parent Influence on Motivation

Brewster and Fager (2000) believe that the earliest influences on a child's motivation to learn are parents and the home environment they come from. Stipek and Seal (2001) concur and add that the community contributes tremendously to a child's academic competence.

The home environment shapes a child's initial attitude toward learning. When parents promote their child's natural curiosity by welcoming questions and encouraging exploration, they give the message that learning is worthwhile ("Student Motivation," n.d.). Parents that support learning and provide fun, educational experiences for their children stimulate children to develop positive attitudes towards learning ("Student Motivation," n.d.). Stipek and Seal (2001) remark that parents can help build intellectual skills starting at birth and continuing throughout the child's school years.

According to Stipek and Seal (2001), parents are the first and most important teachers in their child's life. Parents can make a difference in their child's academic development and can teach the joy of learning by modeling it. Stipek and Seal explain how modeling teaches children valuable strategies for finding information. Fuller (2004) adds that modeling is a powerful tool because children learn through imitation. Fuller indicates that parents should model curiosity and pleasure when they themselves are seeking knowledge.

Fuller (2004) also finds that motivated children tend to have close, loving relationships with their parents. She finds that unmet emotional needs can block children from learning. Fuller points out that a secure parent-child relationship is a huge foundation for the child's self-worth. With positive views of themselves, children become

more motivated and take risks needed for learning and achievement. These children will keep working toward their goals even when frustration and setbacks become possible. Stipek and Seal (2001) concur and add that the closer a child feels to their parents, the more he or she will confide in them.

Fuller (2004) finds that when there is open communication between parents and their children, learning and motivation are boosted. Good communication allows children to feel safe when sharing ideas and feelings. This stimulates intellectual growth. In order to build a strong relationship, Fuller suggests that families engage in fun activities together such as sports, painting, reading, or other hobbies. She summarizes that direct involvement shows a child that he or she is valuable.

Stipek and Seal (2001) claim that nurturing a child's interests outside of school is important because conditions in the home or community are more conducive to fostering passions than the school environment. They discovered that parents can broaden their child's experiences by taking them to museums, aquariums, farms, parks and historic sites. Virtual visits to web sites are also very meaningful. Stipek and Seal (2001) find that this is a great way for families to bond and these activities enhance school learning.

To help children be successful with homework, Brewster and Fager (2000) suggest that parents create a place that is conducive to learning and studying. When parents provide a physical climate including academic supplies, ample lighting, and few distractions, children are more likely to focus on learning. Stipek and Seal (2001) agree and add that parents who set aside work time, reinforce study skills, and clarify assignments emphasize the value of learning and homework. Reinforcement at home to complete assignments shows children that parents are interested in their academic

achievement. Stipek and Seal (2001) find that a parent who develops supplemental learning activities, promotes internet exploration, researches career requirements and plays educational games with their children has a vested interest in their child's education and future.

According to Stipek and Seal (2001), adults who experience difficulty in school are likely to be sympathetic to the problems their children face. The researchers indicate that parents should refrain from negative discussions about learning. Portal and Sampson (2001) believe that parents need to express positive feedback which can help instill self-confidence in their children. When parents focus on improvement and effort, they stress to their children that grades are only one small indicator of their educational progress. Fuller (2004) adds that grades do not tell the whole story and do not guarantee success in life. When parents have attainable expectations for their children, children are encouraged to work hard and improve regardless of their grade.

When children are performing well in school or showing improvement, parents need to acknowledge this achievement (Stipek & Seal, 2001). These researchers found that parents do not need to use excessive rewards to acknowledge their child's achievement. Stipek and Seal suggest that parents verbally praise achievement and give specific feedback about accomplishments. Positive feedback nourishes a child's feelings of competence, which naturally increases intrinsic motivation.

Fried (2001) stresses that parents should stay current with what is happening with their child at school. He believes that it is important for parents to get to know their child's teachers. Fried suggests that parents observe classes, volunteer to help, and become active in the district parent-teacher organization. Stipek and Seal (2001) add that

it is also important for parents to read monthly newsletters, report cards, and teacher notes that are sent home. They believe that staying in contact with teachers allows parents to gain and share vital information about their child's progress and achievement.

Brewster and Fager (2000) believe that active parent involvement shows numerous benefits including increased student motivation and engagement in school. Children who receive the right support and encouragement during early years will be creative and adventurous learners throughout their lives ("Motivating Learning," n.d.).

Teacher Influence on Motivation

According to Mendler (2000), a teacher's role as a motivator is to enhance the development of students' positive sense of self and motivation for learning. In order to build student motivation, teachers must establish a student-teacher relationship, create a positive classroom environment, build student competence, de-emphasize grades, give frequent feedback, build on mistakes and prior learning, incorporate many teaching styles, relate curriculum to students' lives, give students choices, and communicate with parents.

One cannot underestimate the power of the student-teacher relationship. Mendler (2000) highlights the importance of a teacher caring more about the student as a person than as a learner. Teachers that take the time to get to know their students and interests establish positive, personal relationships. Mendler recognizes that students are more motivated in school when they feel their teacher genuinely cares about them and their school success.

Mendler (2000) states that teachers can build personal relationships with students by attending school music concerts, sporting events, and after school activities. This allows teachers and students to interact without the pressure of having to complete academic work within a set period of time. Mendler also notes that this can be a great way to interact with kids who might lack interest or competence in a particular class but who shine in other areas of interest.

Researchers also claim that teachers should share parts of their own personal lives with students if they are interested in building long lasting relationships. Sharing personal information helps students see teachers as approachable human beings, not just authority figures (Brophy, 1998; Mendler, 2000; Portal & Sampson, 2001; Smith, n.d.; Vitto, 2003; Wright, 2002).

Although teachers do not have control over the individual characteristics of their students, they do have control over the kind of classroom environment they construct (Turner & Patrick, 2004). Brophy (1998) believes that teachers can create an inviting physical climate that is comfortable and compatible for instruction. Brophy further claims that displaying student work, colorful and encouraging posters, and accessible desk arrangements can make the classroom a welcoming place.

Teachers can also create a positive emotional climate within the classroom (Mendler, 2000). Mendler finds that in order for students to learn, they must feel safe, accepted, and welcomed. This allows students to take risks in class and focus on learning (Mendler, 2000; Portal & Sampson, 2001; Wright, 2002). Mendler suggests that teachers should greet students at the door, interact with them, and be available to listen to concerns and problems. He believes that teacher enthusiasm is paramount to the

emotional climate of a classroom. Mendler continues that teachers should continuously demonstrate with words, actions, body language, and emotion why they love what they are teaching. He states "Teaching with passion is the one means of motivating that is completely within teacher control. Students get excited when educators are committed to sharing information in a lively, energetic, excited way" (p. 59).

According to Stipek and Seal (2001), the more competent kids feel academically, the more interested they are in schoolwork and the harder they study. These researchers believe that students are more apt to stay involved in tasks when they are feeling successful. Teachers can help ensure success by checking for understanding during lessons and creating assessments that kids can do well on (Vitto, 2003). Mendler (2000) notes that teachers must find the right level of challenge for their students. If the work is too challenging students will often give up. Tasks that are too easy are not beneficial. Mendler finds that in both of these circumstances, motivation decreases. If students perceive themselves as competent, and able to achieve academic tasks, they are more likely to be persistent when facing a challenge (Muir, 2001).

According to Smith (n.d.), some students have never experienced academic success. These students are turned off to learning when they receive bad grades or are publically embarrassed. Smith notes that students are rarely motivated in a subject in which they feel unsuccessful and incompetent. Stipek and Seal (2001) point out that adults are no different. They, too, stray from unpleasant activities in which success seems difficult or impossible.

When students continually fail at academic tasks, they begin to view success as unattainable (Middleton & Spanias, 1999). This leads to learned helplessness in students.

Learned helplessness occurs when a student feels like they have no control over their learning success (Tileston, 2004). Hopkins (2005) finds that some students believe that intelligence is a quality people are born with and little can be done to change it. Teachers need to change this view by stressing that effort can increase academic success.

It is important that teachers de-emphasize grades and focus on effort. Effort should be rewarded along with quality of work (Davis, 1999; Haines, 2001; Mendler, 2000; Wright, 2002). Putting the focus on effort is crucial for increasing achievement, motivation and promoting learning. Many students do not try because they believe that even if they work hard, their achievement will not improve (Mendler, 2000). Mendler (2000) encourages teachers to give a separate grade for effort. This grade will be based on factors such as participation and homework. An effort grade will reinforce the importance of each individual working to his or her highest potential. Mendler also believes that teachers should allow students to retake tests and quizzes, revise papers, and re-do assignments. He thinks that by giving these options, teachers let students know that their effort can lead to improved achievement.

According to Mendler (2000), students want and need to know if they are being successful in school. He believes that it is important for teachers to give frequent, positive feedback on academics and behavior. Mendler continues that handing back assignments, tests, quizzes and projects within a short amount of time stresses that the assignment is valuable. Smith (n.d.) concurs, but adds that teachers should give suggestions on how to improve and state students' strengths. Smith suggests that teachers should tell students what they did correctly, rather than what they did wrong. He finds that negative feedback makes a student less confident and can cause them to lose motivation.

Mendler (2000) emphasizes that teachers should build on mistakes to increase learning. He believes that mistakes can highlight how more learning needs to occur and how learning has improved. Also, Mendler recommends that the teacher point out something positive about a student's answer and effort. Goslin (2003) adds that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process. He stresses that teachers need to express to students that it is okay to make mistakes. Mendler agrees and adds that when a teacher corrects a student's work or behavior, every effort should be made to do so in private. He finds that students will be less embarrassed and more willing to do what a teacher asks.

No two people learn exactly the same way ("Student Participation," n.d.). This article points out that teachers must use many different teaching styles to involve everyone in the learning process. Classroom activities should aim to include various types of instruction including visual, written, auditory, and kinesthetic ("Student Participation," n.d.). When a variety of instructional strategies are used, multiple intelligences are addressed which maximizes learning for all (Mendler, 2000; Portal & Sampson, 2001; Smith, n.d.).

According to Davis (1999), students learn by doing and making sense of what they are studying. He feels that boredom leads to passivity which dampens motivation. Davis recommends that students be actively involved in activities and problem solving exercises. Fuller (2004) concurs and adds that learning should be inquiry-based because people are naturally curious. Curiosity is a natural human motivator for all people. Mendler (2000) finds that teachers can induce curiosity by using mystery, novelty, fantasy, suspense, controversy, and inductive reasoning, in their teaching. He adds that the use of music to teach content can be very beneficial to students. Students develop a

positive attitude toward a subject when they are actively participating and interested in the topic (Mendler, 2000; Portal & Sampson, 2001; Vitto, 2003).

Teachers can also incorporate games as part of their teaching style. Burns (2003) notes that both students and teachers get excited about games because they are fun, provide practice with skills, and build motivation. She proposes that games allow students to apply newly acquired ideas to problem-solving situations and develop strategic thinking. While most teachers work hard to make cooperation and collaboration part of the culture of their class, Burns believes that there is a place for games in which there is a winner. It is important for students to learn to win and lose gracefully (Burns, 2003).

According to Portal and Sampson (2001), students are most engaged and motivated when they see that the material they are learning is relevant, challenging, and interesting. If students do not see the need for it in their lives, they often are not interested (Portal & Sampson, 2001). Vitto (2003) points out that teachers can help students make a connection between what they will be learning and why it is important to them. Mendler (2000) and Smith (n.d.) agree and add that teachers need to connect ideas to their interests and life experiences. With each new unit, teachers should include at least one real-life demonstration or application. Field trips and guest speakers are excellent ways to bring learning to life (Mendler, 2000; Smith, n.d.). Teachers can also draw on technology applications to simulate real world environments and authentic tasks (Kariuki & Wilson, 2002). Rodgers (n.d.) reports that schools with updated technology show gains in the area of student motivation.

According to Mendler (2000) and Wright (2002), students want to have choices and a voice that is heard in the classroom. Wright suggests that the simplest way to encourage ownership of learning is to offer students significant choices. He clarifies that choices can be included in most assignments, projects, papers and tests. Mendler concurs and adds that teachers can give students the choice to answer three out of the six questions provided. He adds that choice can be used when assigning a paper or a project. The more students are involved in choosing how they will show what they have learned, the greater the chance that they will complete the assignment (Mendler, 2000; Wright, 2002). Mendler and Wright also encourage teachers to involve students in developing rules and consequences, making up test questions, and choosing topics to cover.

Brewster and Fager (2000) note that when working to increase student participation and motivation, it is important that teachers communicate with parents. They suggest that teachers and parents discuss different ways they can support their children's learning both at home and at school. Wagner (2002) states that teachers can make home visits, phone calls, and send letters to communicate with parents. She stresses that teachers must overcome language and cultural barriers. Wagner continues that when talking with parents, teachers should use clear language that parents can understand. When teachers involve parents, they are sending the message that they are an important part of their child's success (Brewster & Fager, 2000; Wagner, 2002).

Social Constructivism

Oldfather, West, White and Wilmarth (1999) state that social constructivism is defined as learning constructed through interactions with others. Teachers believing in this theory structure their classrooms so students work together to make sense of information. Oldfather et al. (1999) believe that in order to learn, students must construct new knowledge in ways that are meaningful to them.

According to Oldfather et. al. (1999), a social constructivist classroom provides opportunities for social interaction and self-expression. This can be accomplished by infusing cooperative learning or other group activities into the curriculum. Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec (1998) define cooperative learning as "...the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (p. 5). Johnson et al. (1998) find that this type of learning promotes higher achievement, increased motivation to learn, positive relationships among students and teachers, along with favorable social skills and greater productivity by all students.

Oldfather et al. (1999) state that a teacher who utilizes cooperative learning helps students understand that they are co-constructors of knowledge and can make sense of things themselves. These researchers believe that students have the power to seek knowledge and understand the world. Mendler (2000) notes that students also begin to feel a sense of empowerment when they are in control of their own learning. Johnson et al. (1998) state that cooperative learning maximizes all student learning and promotes positive interdependence. Johnson et al. continues that the class believes that they achieve or fail together and they hold themselves and each other accountable for high quality work. The students are able to build positive social skills and evaluate their

effectiveness as a team. Student empowerment and feelings of success and competence lead to increased motivation (Mendler, 2000).

Oldfather et al. state that a teacher who holds the social constructivist stance focuses on learning as sense-making and not just the acquisition of rote knowledge. This causes learning to become student-centered and the teacher now serves as a guide. Learning becomes a collaborative enterprise in which students help each other and share different prior knowledge. The conversations are structured and unstructured depending on the task and the flow of ideas is multidirectional. "Traditional student and teacher roles are viewed as flexible" (Oldfather et al., 1999, p. 74). Mendler (2000) recognizes that when students are actively engaged in their learning, the quality of their work and their level of learning improves. He adds that students become intrinsically motivated to educate themselves, which is a valuable life-long skill.

According to Oldfather et al. (1999), in the social constructivist classroom, student choice is valued and supported. Mendler (2000) believes that one of the most significant methods of motivating students is to give the power of learning directly to the student. He states that educators must define academic standards, and procedures, but students should be encouraged to share their input and have choices as much as possible.

The learning environment can be greatly improved by having groups of students involved in solving difficult problems. The classroom emulates the workplace, captures student interest, and develops self-directed learners ("It's Just," 2002). Students build on each others ideas and take responsibility for their learning. Oldfather et al. (1999) concur and add that members of the class support each other's learning, celebrate each other's successes, and view errors as a natural part of learning and as an opportunity for growth.

They go on to say that students feel safe to participate without fear of ridicule. The cooperative classroom is less intimidating for most students because discussions take place in small groups rather than one individual addressing a teacher's question in front of the entire class. When students feel comfortable and competent in the classroom, they will be more motivated to participate.

Student motivation will always be a topic in education with many different viewpoints. The above literature review shows what many researchers believe are the best ways to motivate kids. The three primary influences that most agree upon are: parents, teachers and peers. Each group plays its own role in the educational process. Understanding how to best utilize each is and should be the goal of all educators.

Chapter 3

Methods, Applications and Evaluation

After reviewing the relevant literature on student motivation, I found that I was implementing many of the ideas that are thought to increase student motivation as suggested by the authors. Some of these ideas included: establishing a student-teacher relationship, creating a positive physical and emotional climate in my classroom, focusing on student effort, providing frequent, positive feedback, and building on student mistakes and prior learning. I found that I could use some improvement in the areas of incorporating a variety of teaching and learning activities, relating curriculum to students' lives, giving students choices, communicating with parents and allowing time for social constructivism.

I decided to choose one of these areas of improvement as the focus for my study. Even though I use many different activities in my classroom to appeal to all learners and increase motivation, I do not feel that I reach everyone in my class. There are still students that are unmotivated and do not participate. Therefore, I designed a study with the goal to increase student motivation and participation.

To begin my study, I developed three different surveys that would be used to gather information about how to motivate students. Each survey was designed for a specific group of people including students, teachers and parents. The student survey (see Appendix A) was given to a target group of students that were part of a ninth grade suburban school in Western New York. The school consisted of 505 students during the 2005-2006 school year. The targeted population of 125 students was predominately caucasian with 26 minority students. This ninth grade school was coed and all students

came from a middle to lower class socioeconomic background. Approximately 8% percent or 40 students in the target group qualified for special education services.

The student survey consisted of nine open-ended questions and one question where students had to circle their answers. The questions related to student attitude towards math, motivating activities, parent support and how students affect each other's learning. The teacher survey (see Appendix B) consisted of three open-ended questions that inquired about activities teachers thought motivated students, how parents could motivate students, and how students affect motivation. The parent survey (see Appendix C) gave a brief explanation of my study and asked parents six open-ended questions about their attitude toward math, if they gave their child homework support, how they motivated their child, and what they thought teachers could do to be more motivating.

After getting permission from my principal and superintendent to administer these surveys, 125 students were given ten minutes at the beginning of their math class to complete the survey. Students were asked to take the parent survey home and have their parents or guardians fill it out. All parent surveys were due a week from that day. Teacher surveys were distributed into school mailboxes. Teachers were given a week to complete and return them to my school mailbox. All surveys were anonymous. In total, 125 student surveys, 32 teacher surveys and 44 parent surveys were returned.

From these surveys, I compiled a list of activities that students, teachers and parents found motivating for students. I narrowed down this list into another list that ranked the top ten, most mentioned ways to motivate students. These activities were utilized within my classroom to see if I could increase student motivation and participation.

The next part of the study was to collect some baseline data before implementing the motivating activities. I chose four unmotivated boys from my math class as my key participants. Of these students, two were caucasian and two were African American. These students were chosen because they rarely participated and were generally disinterested in class activities. I wanted to see if I could increase their motivation to learn and get them to participate more often in class.

I focused on five observable characteristics of these students while collecting baseline data. For one-week, during their 80 minute block, I recorded how many times these four students put their head down, gave up on assigned tasks, displayed off-task behaviors, answered questions, and asked questions.

During the next part of the study, motivating activities gained from the surveys were implemented. Each class, for the next three weeks, I implemented one or more motivating activity into my lesson to see if it would increase student motivation and participation. The top ten activities from the surveys included: games, computers, application to real life, using white boards, word searches and crossword puzzles, movies, candy, cooperative learning, praise and encouragement. During the three-week period, I continued to record whether the four students put their heads down, gave up on assigned tasks, displayed off-task behaviors, answered questions, and asked questions.

After the four weeks of collecting data, I met with the four students and discussed my study. I told the students that my goal was to increase their motivation and participation. I discussed the behaviors I was tracking and the activities I had implemented. Students were asked which activities motivated and engaged them the most, what was motivating and engaging about the activities, and what other activities

could have been used to motivate and engage them. The following chapter describes in detail my findings.

Chapter 4

Results / Data

The purpose of the study was to determine whether motivational strategies would have any effect on student participation. The following bar graphs show the baseline data and the results collected during the three weeks of implementing motivating activities.

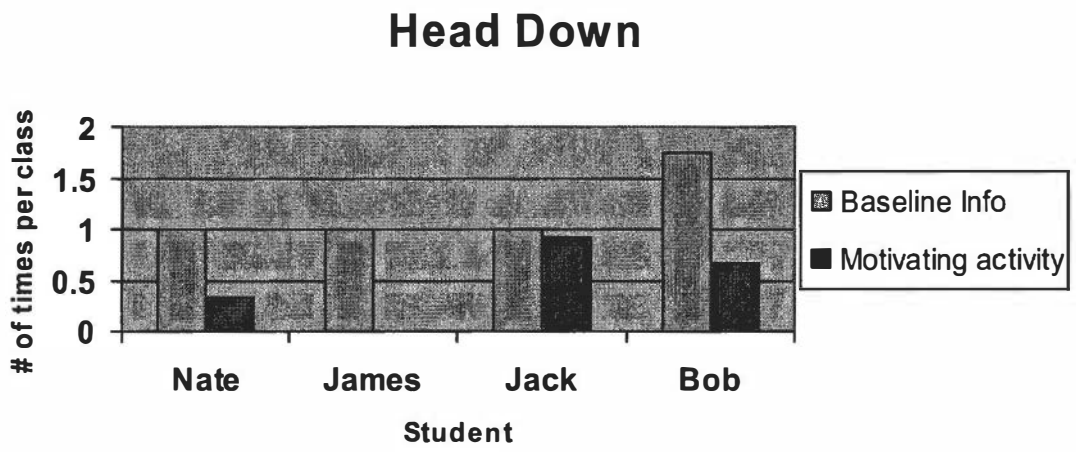

Table 1

According to Table 1, Nate put his head down an average of one time per class while collecting baseline data. When the motivating activity was implemented, he put his head down an average of .33 times per class. While collecting baseline data, James put his head down an average of one time per class. During the motivating activities, he never put his head down. While collecting baseline data, Jack put his head down an average of one time per class. When the motivating activity was implemented, he put his head down an average of .92 times per class. Before implementing any motivating activities, Bob put his head down an average of 1.75 times per class. During implementation, he put his head down an average of .67 times per class.

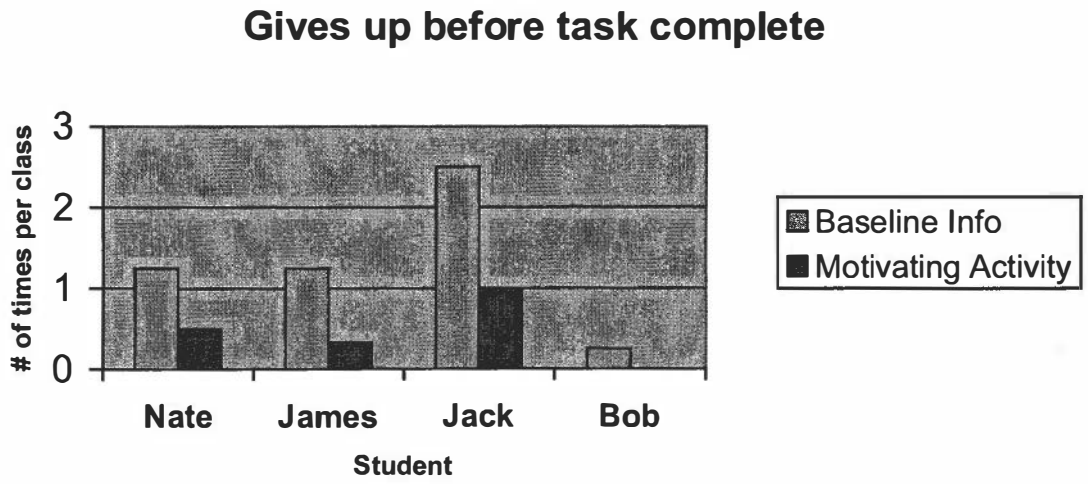

Table 2

According to Table 2, Nate gave up before completing the assigned task an average of 1.25 times per class while collecting baseline data. When the motivating activity was implemented, he gave up an average of .5 times per class. While collecting baseline data, James gave up before completing the assigned task an average of 1.25 times per class. During the motivating activities, he gave up an average of .33 times per class. While collecting baseline data, Jack gave up before completing the assigned task an average of 2.5 times per class. When the motivating activity was implemented, he gave up an average of one time per class. Before implementing any motivating activities, Bob gave up before completing the assigned task an average of .25 times per class. During implementation, he never gave up.

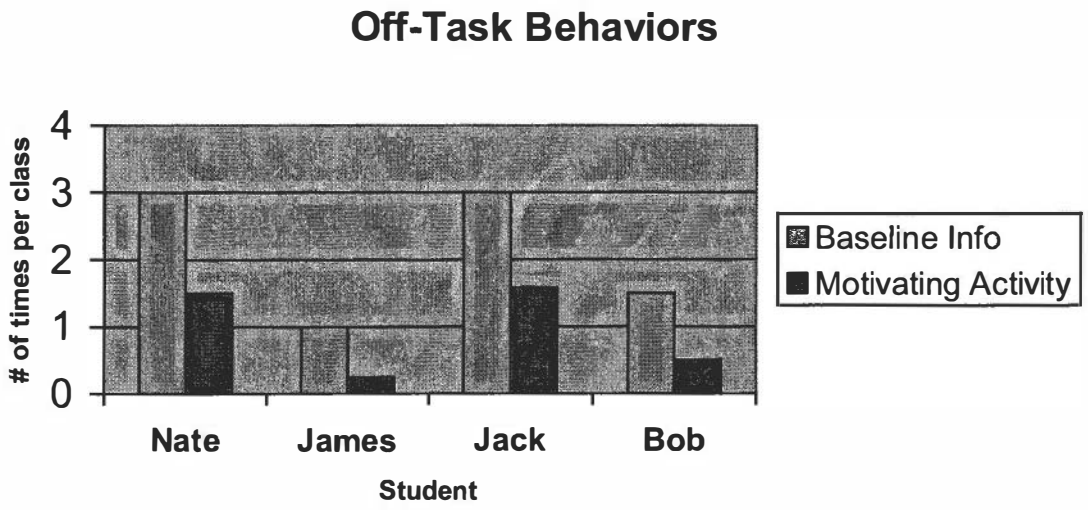

Table 3

According to Table 3, Nate was off-task an average of three times per class while collecting baseline data. When the motivating activity was implemented, he was off-task an average of 1.5 times per class. While collecting baseline data, James was off-task an average of one time per class. During the motivating activities, he was off-task an average of .25 times per class. While collecting baseline data, Jack was off-task an average of three times per class. When the motivating activity was implemented, he was off-task an average of 1.58 times per class. Before implementing any motivating activities, Bob was off-task an average of 1.5 times per class. During implementation, he was off-task an average of .5 times per class.

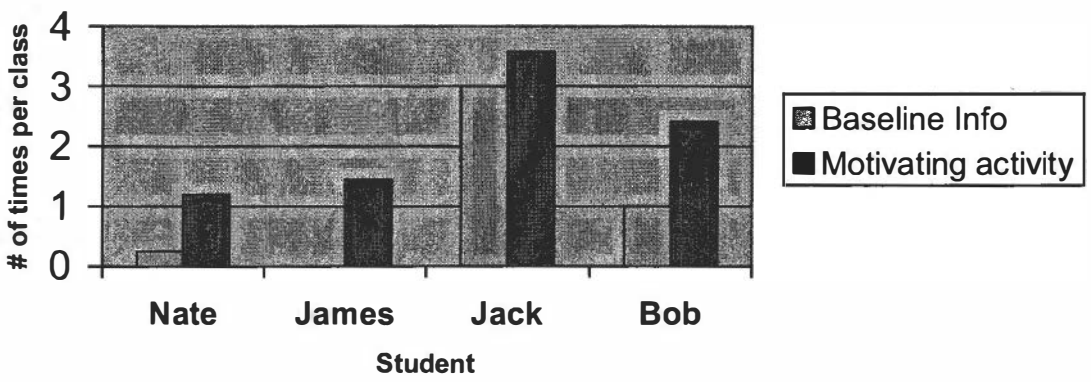

Table 4

According to Table 4, Nate answered a question an average of .25 times per class while collecting baseline data. When the motivating activity was implemented, he answered a question an average of 1.2 times per class. While collecting baseline data, James never answered a question. During the motivating activities, he answered a question an average of 1.45 times per class. While collecting baseline data, Jack answered a question an average of three times per class. When the motivating activity was implemented, he answered a question an average of 3.58 times per class. Before implementing any motivating activities, Bob answered a question an average of one time per class. During implementation, he answered a question an average of 2.41 times per class.

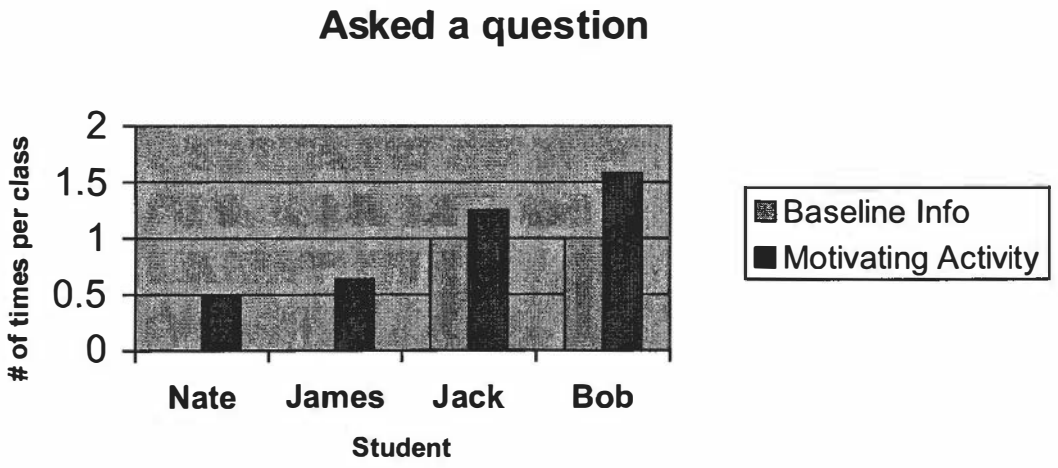

Table 5

According to Table 5, Nate never asked a question in class while collecting baseline data. When the motivating activity was implemented, he asked a question an average of .5 times per class. While collecting baseline data, James, also, never asked a question. During the motivating activities, he asked a question an average of .64 times per class. While collecting baseline data, Jack asked a question an average of one time per class. When the motivating activity was implemented, he asked a question an average of 1.25 times per class. Before implementing any motivating activities, Bob asked a question an average of one time per class. During implementation, he asked a question an average of 1.58 times per class.

Discussion with four students about the study

After the four-week period of collecting data, I met with all four students to discuss the study. I explained to them that my goal of the study was to increase their motivation and participation in class. Students were shown their surveys and behavior tracking sheets. I explained what behaviors I was observing and why those behaviors were important indicators of motivation and participation. Students were then asked to respond to three questions.

First, I asked the students which activities motivated them or got them to participate the most. Nate said that he liked Word Whack and Jeopardy. James and Jack agreed that Word Whack got them to participate most. Bob agreed and added that MATHO and Hoops also motivated him.

Second, I asked the students why these specific activities, such as Word Whack, motivated them to participate more than others. Nate and Bob responded that Word Whack was fun and motivating because they got to move around. James liked Word Whack because it was not a paper and pencil task. He said we did too much writing in class. Jack was motivated because he could show everyone what he had learned and agreed it was fun.

Third, I asked students what other activities would motivate or get them to participate in class more often. Nate offered that we should do more work with friends. James disagreed and said he did not work well with friends. He stated that it distracted him and preferred projects and hands-on tasks. Jack suggested that I give students participation points and that we play more games. Bob agreed and recommended that we play Hoops more often.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to determine whether motivational strategies would have any effect on student participation. To determine whether or not these strategies had an effect, I tracked five observable behaviors of four students for four weeks. I recorded how many times each student put their head down, gave up on an assigned task before finishing, was off-task, answered questions and asked relevant questions. From the tables and data, all negative behaviors, such as putting their head down, being off-task, and quitting a task before it is completed, decreased when a motivating activity was implemented. All of the positive behaviors, such as asking relevant questions and answering questions, increased when a motivating activity was implemented. This change happened with every student. Although the data did not change dramatically, there was a consistent change among all of the students involved. These results lead me to believe that implementing a motivating activity had a positive impact on student participation.

Even though some behaviors did not improve as much as I would have liked, I do feel that the motivating activities had a positive effect. As a result, I will continue to implement motivating activities suggested by teachers, parents and students. Each year, I plan to survey my new students to gain ideas about what motivates them and implement those new ideas along with others that have been successful. I also intend to share this information with my colleagues and parents and include some ideas about how parents and teachers can work together to motivate students in my introductory letter to families. My school district also asks teachers for different ideas for teacher workshops. I will

recommend that they offer a teacher workshop that focuses on ideas to help motivate all learners.

This study helped me to reflect on my current instructional practices and how motivating I am in the classroom. I believe that increasing student motivation and participation is essential to a student's educational experience. After reading a variety of literature on the topics of student motivation and participation, many of my beliefs were reinforced. The motivated student does better in school than the unmotivated student. By increasing motivation, students develop positive behaviors that are needed to become lifelong learners. These behaviors include being more attentive, participating in class activities, persisting on challenging tasks, and having positive feelings about learning and school.

After reviewing the literature, I believe that parents and teachers have the most impact on student motivation. I agree that learning begins in the home and parents are the students' first teachers. Parents must instill the belief that learning is fun and worthwhile. Parents must be supportive and model the joy of learning. It is so important that families engage in learning activities together and invest time in their child's education.

Teachers must also strive to motivate and educate a diverse group of students. I believe that teachers must establish a student-teacher relationship, create a positive physical and emotional classroom environment, incorporate various teaching and learning activities, and relate curriculum to their students' lives so students can make sense of it. This study provided some evidence that a teacher's instructional activities can affect participation and motivation.

Different students have different educational needs. Therefore, it is important to attack motivation from various angles. I saw a positive change with implementing various motivating activities. I believe that if I incorporated more ideas such as relating curriculum to their lives and communicating with parents, my results might improve even more. If I were to conduct another study pertaining to motivation, I would include one of the ideas mentioned above.

One change I would make in this study would be to pick a target group that consists of a mixed group of regular education and special education students. My target group was all special education students. Three out of the four students had attention deficit disorder. This disorder greatly contributes to their inability to focus and attend to the lesson being taught. These students often give up on tasks because they have missed essential information needed to complete a task. This becomes frustrating for them and they often shut down and lose focus. The fourth student was learning disabled. He lacks many basic skills and processes information slowly. He becomes frustrated with multi-step tasks and often gives up before he completes a task.

Another recommendation I would make would be to conduct this study in another content area. It can be difficult to adapt and modify algebra activities so all learners could be successful and participate because it is a rigid curriculum. Other content areas allow for other motivating activities such as art and computer activities, group work, and movies.

A third recommendation would be to limit the number of targeted behaviors to three instead of five. It was difficult to watch all four students and correctly record all

five observable behaviors at the same time. Using a paraprofessional to help record student behaviors would also be helpful.

Lack of student motivation is a huge problem as student's progress through school. As I grow as an educator, I will continue to work on implementing various instructional activities to increase student motivation and participation. It is also imperative that parents and teachers continue to learn more about this topic. Students that possess motivation to learn and succeed are the keys to our future.

Appendix A
Student Survey

Student Survey

1. Do you like math? _____

   Why or why not? _____

2. Circle the math activities you like to do.

writing notes	teacher lecture	Tic-Tac-Toe
Around the World	Jeopardy	board games
Using the computer	using the calculator	working with peers
Investigations	using manipulatives	projects
Crosswords	presentations	puzzles
Application to real-life	word searches	word problems
MATHO	Word Whack!	Dry-erase boards

3. What are some other activities you like to do in class?

   _____

4. Do your parents help you with homework and studying for tests? _____

   If yes, how do they help? _____

   _____

5. Do your parents motivate you to do well in school? _____

   If yes, how do they motivate you? _____

   _____

6. Do peers affect how you do in school? _____

   If yes, how do they affect you? _____

Appendix B
Teacher Survey

1. What activities motivate your students?

2. What can parents do to motivate their students?

3. How do you think peers affect student motivation?

Appendix C
Parent Survey

Dear Parents / Guardians,

I am currently working on a graduate school project pertaining to student motivation. I am researching how parents and teachers can motivate students. I am surveying a small population of parents, students and teachers. I hope to observe students and gain information about what motivates them in school. Please fill out the following anonymous survey. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Amanda Richards

1. Do you like math? _____

   Why or why not? _____

2. Do you help your child with homework? _____

   If yes, how do you help him or her? _____

   _____

3. How do you motivate your child to do well in school? _____

   _____

4. How do you think teachers could motivate students to learn?

   _____

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